T-P 8.8.69

Green Beret Death Case Grows More Mystifying

Speculation Body May Not Have Been Found

SAIGON (AP) — The case of the Green Beret commander and seven subordinates charged with murdering a Vietnamese grew more mystifying Thursday. There was speculation that the body of the man may not have been found.

American and South Vietnamese authorities have refused to identify the victim. It was not even made public whether he was a civilian or a military man.

Since the announcement Wednesday of charges against the former U.S. Army Special Forces commander in Vietnam and his seven subordinates, official sources have clammed up.

It appeared the clampdown was ordered by the U.S. Command in Saigon or possibly the Pentagon.

In the absence of any official information, speculation and gossip spread throughout the military structure. One unconfirmed story identified the victim as a Vietnamese official whose body was dropped in the South China Sea.

The U.S. Embassy and military headquarters refused to say whether the South Vietnamese government had been notified officially that a Vietnamese citizen had been killed.

REFUSE TO SAY

Officials of the South Vietnamese government, similarly, refused to say whether South Vietnam brought the matter to the attention of American authorities.

The eight accused remained under guard at the U.S. Army's sprawling Long Binh base 12 miles north of Saigon.

They are Col. Robert B. Rheault, a 43-year-old West Pointer from Vineyard Haven, Mass., and New Canaan, Conn. — who commanded the 5th Special Forces group until he was relieved last month—two majors, three captains, a chief warrant officer and a sergeant. Three of the men were intelligence specialists.

Some of the men—all charged with murder and conspiracy to commit murder—have engaged civilian lawyers. At least one attorney was reported en route to Vietnam from the United States.

He was George Gregory of Cheraw, S.C., engaged to defend Maj. Thomas Middleton Jr., of Jefferson, S.C.

There were reports that Gregory said his client had been promised immunity if he would testify against the others but had refused out of loyalty to Rheault.

The news of the charges against Rheault stunned many of the Green Beret troopers at their main base in Nha Trang, on the east coast 200 miles northeast of Saigon. The charge says the Vietnamese was killed near Nha Trang June 20.

OVER 40,000

This is the base from which all the overt and covert operations of the Green Beret forces in Vietnamese are controlled. The Special Forces command more than 40,000 tribesmen and and South Vietnamese irregulars furnish advisers to 100 or so special camps and run countless clandestine patrols and other operations in sensitive areas, particularly in Laos.

The Green Beret troopers at Nha Trang now are commanded by Col. Alexander Lemberes, Sparks, Nev., who succeeded Rheault July 21.

"I just can't figure what this thing is all about," Lemberes said Thursday. "I've asked several people what went on and I can't get an answer from anyone. I've made calls and I can't find anything out."

There was no indication how far the investigation had progressed or when the men might face a military court-martial.

Presumably the trial would be held at the headquarters of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, at Long Binh.